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Michael Hemesath

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu

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Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2014 June 30. Trigger warnings and uncomfortable learning [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 June 6]. <http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2014/06/30/trigger-warnings-and-uncomfortable-learning/>.

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Quad 136

Learning

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

Trigger Warnings and Uncomfortable Learning



There is a new controversy on college campuses. It involves the use of so called trigger warnings, which are defined by the urban Dictionary as, “Used to alert people when an internet post, book, article, picture, video, audio clip, or some other media could potentially cause extremely negative reactions (such as post-traumatic flashbacks or self-harm) due to its content. Sometimes abbreviated as ‘TW’, these warnings have now migrated from the internet to college classrooms. Students at the University of California at Santa Barbara and Oberlin College, among other schools, **have asked that such warning be included on course syllabi.** The idea is to let students avoid courses that might be uncomfortable, and, in some cases, opt out of certain parts of a course. (Similar student concerns came up in a **recent post** about a controversy at Wellesley.)

At Oberlin, an initial draft of a guide for faculty “asked professors to put trigger warnings in their syllabuses. The guide said they should flag anything that might ‘disrupt a student’s learning’ and ‘cause trauma,’ including anything that would suggest the inferiority of anyone who is transgender (a form of discrimination known as cissexism) or who uses a wheelchair (or ableism).” This draft has subsequently been withdrawn for additional review following faculty concerns.

The challenge to faculty and the liberal arts educational mission are captured succinctly in the *New York Times* headline: “Warning: The Literary Canon Could Make Students Squirm.” Much of the world’s great literature, art and even music were created to challenge conventions and to make its readers, viewers and listeners uncomfortable. *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, Picasso’s art, Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, even *To Kill a Mockingbird* were created to elicit reactions from their audiences. The Bible is filled with challenging, violent and painful stories and imagery. Surely a world in which the Bible might merit a trigger warning is one where the sensibilities of students have been over-weighted at the expense of learning and exploring ideas. (And the examples here are only drawn from the humanities. The social sciences and even natural sciences surely have their own sensitive topics. Evolution? The Holocaust?)

In a *New Republic* **article** on the spread of trigger warnings, Jenny Jarvie writes:

Trigger warnings are presented as a gesture of empathy, but the irony is they lead only to more solipsism, an over-preoccupation with one’s own feelings—much to the detriment of society as a whole. Structuring public life around the most fragile personal sensitivities will only restrict all of our horizons. Engaging with ideas involves risk, and slapping warnings on them only undermines the principle of intellectual exploration. We cannot anticipate every potential trigger—the world, like the Internet, is too large and

unwieldy. But even if we could, why would we want to? Bending the world to accommodate our personal frailties does not help us overcome them.

The educational experience should never be gratuitously painful, but the very best liberal arts education is by definition going to be uncomfortable. The nature of such an education is to take students out of their comfort zones and challenge them with new ideas, subjects, people and experiences—just like those they will inevitably encounter in the world after graduation.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | June 30th, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

About the Author: [Michael Hemesath](#)



Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).